

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021  
Mark 1; 4-11

### **Baptism. What are you talking about?**

*“May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!” (Psalm 29)*

Within the life of any church, we presume that everybody understands what we are talking about when we talk about certain things. Have you ever been a visitor in a church you don't know? When everybody knows when to stand but you don't...when they turn round and look at you and say words you don't know but they all seem to know the words. It is so confusing and could put you off going back again. And let's not get talking about communion or baptism. Why do people go forward, no smiles, all looking gloomy, and what do they do? And why are some people sunk into water (yes, usually adults) while others (usually children) get their head wet? It all seems fine, unless you are a visitor and don't know why, how, when. We do take things for granted in a church, don't we?

So, what is the today's Bible reading talking about? What does it take for granted? What needs explaining? We do have to begin with John because Jesus doesn't appear till nearly the end.

John did not fear living differently – the way he dressed, what he ate, living in the desert, what he spoke about. All this pointed in a different direction. John clearly assumed the role of the prophets of what we call the Old Testament, as was mentioned during. John caused quite an impact on the people, they came from miles around to hear him and even responded to his message: repent, be baptised, change the way you live. Baptism is the translation of a Greek word that means “emerging” – emerging from the waters after being submerged in them.

John was outspoken, he spoke truth to power, as would Jesus, and this finally led to their death. Having said this, John was also very clear that he was not the promised one, he was just preparing the way for him.

But what did all this mean? Most of us would recognize the sign of the old covenant in circumcision, but what did baptism mean in those days, because for us it finally replaced circumcision as a sign of belonging to the new covenant. And we know Jesus had been circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. We should also bear in mind that the use of water in Jewish liturgy was quite common: ablutions were required for priests (Num. 19:1-22; Lev 16:24-28), the use of water as a sign of cleansing was well known (Eze 36:25), though this was quite different from baptism as understood in the New Testament as the sign of the forgiveness of sins. At the beginning of the Christian era, Judaism adopted baptism of proselytes, seven days after circumcision as a true sign that the candidate wanted to adopt the Jewish religion. So, what we see in the reading today is nothing unknown.

*Not unknow, but disconcerting.* Why does Jesus approach John for baptism? Are we being prepared for something surprising? I believe we are. Particularly in the gospel of Mark which is so different from any other. We have no famous Prologue here (as in John), we have no birth narratives here. No angels singing, no shepherds, no magi (as in Matthew and Luke). Here we encounter an adult Jesus, and in this first of the written Gospels, the people have no other narrative to turn to (as we have). They are hearing and seeing things for the first time. So, in Mark what we have read today is what we could call “the presentation of Jesus to the wider public”.

Following the first few verses of this chapter 1 all we know is John proclaiming God's calling, and as a result of this, people responded. What was the essence of the preaching of John? It was quite simple really. Life is not going as God wanted it to be for the benefit of all so change is needed. People hear this and realize it involves them and want to change and this is expressed in being baptised – being cleaned for the new life. But why does Jesus respond to this?

Considering this is the first time Jesus is seen (he hasn't said a word so far), he would just look like any other of the people who respond to John's message. John tells everybody that there is one who is to come who will do things differently. And it is not Jesus nor John who open this message up to the new reality. As Jesus emerges from the waters of the river things really do happen: the heavens are torn open (in Greek it is the

same word as when the curtain of the temple is torn open when Jesus dies on the cross: 15; 38), a dove descends and voice from heaven is heard. Who hears this voice? The people? Only Jesus? We can't really tell who heard but we do know that for over 2000 years all have read this as it is recorded in the Gospel and from now on things will never be the same: "You are my Son, whom I love, I am well pleased with you". And just like that Jesus becomes a public figure.

We now realize that what Jesus did was not necessary in his life, but it was for all of us. His first act, before he is proclaimed as the much-loved Son, is to express solidarity with the people. Then, and only then, do we encounter Jesus and public life. This first action seems to summarize all that will follow: his obedience, his openness to God's will. This way we recognize him as the Son, and this is what we read in the Gospel, that voice that comes from above, that dove that descends, the heavens that are torn open. The servant of God is now present among the people, let us pay attention to what follows, and though we are called to learn from Jesus, we too, as John can say 'I am not the one'.

What do we have to repent from? Be it personally or socially, in our individual life or as part of society. As in the times of John we too can recognize things are not going well, change is needed. And change can begin with each of us, and coming together we form a new body, a new reality.

### Let us take a few moments before reading further.

- When was the last time any of us thought about our baptism, and what it means for our life today? Let us try to connect our baptism (we might not even know when it happened) with what John is calling out about, and how Jesus responds to that, and the way that followed. Where are we with that way?
- What do we need changing in our personal life? What do we recognize we say/do not say; do/do not do that does not show others the love of God? What have we got used to doing and cannot imagine doing in any other way that needs to be done differently so other people may feel peace that comes from God? Let us ask God to help us in this.
- Let us also take a few moments to think of social implications... there is so much in the world that is wrong, that cannot stand up as the will of God. The ways we hurt others, destroy others, ignore others, reject others. One clear example currently is the COVID vaccine. We are grateful for the human intelligence that was able to discover it, the production, the distribution. But so far it seems a privilege for some rather than a right for all. What countries will not see a vaccine for a very long time because of economic reasons; OR what governments will support it only if they get exclusive rights of it?

***We live in a world in which "Me" has more value than "We".***

Now we can go back to the Bible passage for today: Jesus begins his public life in a profound act of solidarity with the people. He becomes 'one of them' (= We), and the ministry that he is about to begin will make this visible in so many ways. So, in this we have the answer to the title question: ***Baptism. What are you talking about?*** It is this solidarity which contributes to creating a life in fullness for all, and we are all part of this. Amen

*"In my speaking and my doing; in my believing and my faith, make me always consistent and real. Amen"*

*(Fresh from the Word 2021, Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> January)*